Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute to Present
Rembrandt and Degas: Two Young Artists

First Exhibition Dedicated to Rembrandt’s Influence on Degas Opens November 13

For Immediate Release – Digital images available upon request

WILLIAMSTOWN, MA — After its critically acclaimed presentation at Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum, Rembrandt and Degas: Two Young Artists will make its American debut at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, this autumn. The exhibition explores the Dutch master Rembrandt van Rijn’s impact on French Impressionist Edgar Degas by presenting the self-portraits both artists created in their early twenties. This exhibition brings two magnificent paintings by Rembrandt to the Clark from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, as well as etchings from international collections. Rembrandt and Degas: Two Young Artists is on view at the Clark November 13, 2011, through February 5, 2012.

“The Clark is pleased to have worked with our colleagues at the Rijksmuseum on this exhibition, and we’re happy it will expand as it goes on to The Metropolitan Museum of Art after the Clark’s presentation. The collaboration of the three museums, each with its own collection strengths, has made possible a truly remarkable exhibition,” said Clark director Michael Conforti. “The Clark is delighted to bring this exhibition to the Berkshires with its revealing comparisons between works by Rembrandt and Degas. I know visitors will be excited by the opportunity to see such important works of art.”

Degas first encountered Rembrandt’s etchings during a brief period of study at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Finding the École too rigid, Degas left to pursue an independent course of study in Italy, where he associated with other expatriate French artists. It was in Italy that printmaker Joseph Tourny and painter Gustave Moreau helped Degas to explore Rembrandt’s artistry. Degas was aware of Rembrandt’s youthful proclivity for self-portraits and made direct copies of his etchings in his sketchbooks. Degas’s direct response to Rembrandt is unmistakable in the pairing of two etchings: Rembrandt’s 1637 etching Young Man in a Velvet Cap, and Degas’s copy of this etching, entitled Young Man, Seated, in a Velvet Beret (1857).

Rembrandt’s approach to self-portraiture was unorthodox; he explored widely varied facial expressions and experimented with costuming and lighting. His approach is evidenced in two paintings, both entitled Self-Portrait as a Young Man. The first painting (c. 1628–29, Rijksmuseum) depicts Rembrandt simply dressed and so mysteriously shrouded in shadow.
that his eyes are barely visible. In 1629 (Alte Pinakothek) Rembrandt depicts himself as being directly engaged with the viewer. He looks surprised, and the elegant lace collar he wears indicates that he was attempting to portray himself as more refined than in the earlier painting.

Rembrandt’s break with tradition would have been appealing to Degas, who felt stifled by the teachings of the academy. Degas’s experience in Italy seems to have stimulated his exploration of the technical and expressive potential of self-portraiture in painted and graphic form, and like Rembrandt, he experimented. Rembrandt’s influence is evident in a number of the self-portraits Degas created around this time, including the two paintings presented in this exhibition. The Clark’s Self-Portrait (c. 1857) and The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Self-Portrait (c. 1855–56) are more experimental than Degas’s earlier works and reflect Rembrandt’s use of sharply contrasting light and dark. These works signaled Degas’s emerging role as a leader of the French avant-garde.

The 1850s gave rise to a revival in the art of etching. Many artists, including Degas, re-discovered the art form, which had fallen out of favor after the era of Rembrandt, the last great master of the form. Rembrandt and Degas: Two Young Artists brings together an extraordinary selection of etchings to illustrate how Rembrandt’s mastery of the medium influenced Degas’s work. Both artists appreciated that etching allowed for a more fluid line and greater experimentation than engraving, making this medium desirable for exploring subtle variations in lighting and mood.

When creating an etching, an artist can make adjustments to the original plate with relative ease, resulting in a new “state.” This technique is obvious in two examples of Rembrandt’s Self-Portrait Drawing at a Window (1648). In the fourth state (Rijksmuseum), Rembrandt seems to have reached the fullest expression of the composition. He added a landscape beyond the window which did not appear in previous states, and added so many lines on the plate that he surrounded his figure in darkness. The fifth state (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), is lighter because the plate had become worn from repeated printings, and the face seems to have been burnished by rubbing the plate to produce shallower lines that hold less ink, making the features more legible.

The exhibition also includes a selection of prints and books from the Clark’s collection that demonstrate the broader French interest in Rembrandt in the nineteenth century. These include prints that are copies after Rembrandt and books that catalogue and reproduce his work.

Rembrandt and Degas: Two Young Artists was organized by the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Jenny Reynaerts, Clark Fellow and senior curator of 18th and 19th century paintings at the Rijksmuseum, is curator of the exhibition. Rembrandt and Degas: Two Young Artists will be on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art from February 22 through May 20, 2012.

The Clark

The Clark is one of the few major art museums that also serves as a leading international center for research and scholarship. The Clark presents public and education programs and organizes groundbreaking exhibitions that advance new scholarship, and its research and academic programs
include an international fellowship program and conferences. Its 140-acre campus in the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts includes Stone Hill Center, designed by Tadao Ando and opened in 2008, which houses galleries, meeting and classroom facilities, and the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. The Clark, together with Williams College, sponsors one of the nation’s leading master’s programs in art history.

The Clark is located at 225 South Street in Williamstown, Massachusetts. The galleries are open Tuesday through Sunday, 10:00 am to 5:00 pm (daily in July and August). Admission is free November through May. Admission is $15 June 1 through October 31. Admission is free for children 18 and younger, members, and students with valid ID. For more information, call 413 458 2303 or visit clarkart.edu.

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